Metropolitan, Church of the Pioneers

By Archie Wills

STILL EXPANDING

JOHN T. PIDWELL, who hated the Devil and all his works but loved lively horseflesh, was the key figure in bringing Methodism to Victoria.

In 1858 Pidwell was concerned with the lack of a good Wesleyan congregation in this city. He held prayer meetings in the parlor of his home on Humboldt Street and during one of these the inspiration came that Pidwell should write to his old friend, Dr. Enoch Wood, secretary of the Canada Conference of the Methodist Church in Toronto, and ask that missionaries be sent to this western outpost.

Toronto had no funds for such purpose but turned to the strong British Wesleyan Mission, which advanced £500 to equip and send three Canadian missionaries to Victoria.

After a six-week trip four, not three, missionaries reached Victoria on February 10, 1859. The missionaries were: Rev. Ephriam Evans, DD, formerly of Kingston, Ont.; Rev. Edward White, Rev. Ebenezer Robson and Rev. Arthur Browning.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the coming of these missionaries, a month of special services will be held in Metropolitan United Church commencing on Sunday, February 1. Metropolitan is the Mother Church of the denomination in Victoria, and its influence over the century has been marked.

Before looking at this splendid record, a study of the man responsible for it is interesting. John Pidwell was an unusual character. He established a profitable furniture business in Victoria and was possessed of unlimited energy, which he expended on many good works and on fast-moving horses. It was freely predicted that he would be killed on a wild ride and that's what happened but not before Pidwell had fought the Devil in many ways.

Pidwell was one of the first men here who stood up to John Barleycorn and tried to rid the lusty, infant town of the scourge of strong drink. He called the first meeting which considered establishment of a YMCA in Victoria. He aided in creating a rifle brigade which could assist in defending the town. He took a fling at politics and contested the Saltspring Island seat for the legislative council. It was a comic-opera election and the two candidates were each declared winner until after a long wrangle Pidwell received the seat.

Pidwell was afraid of nothing. In the early morning one day in 1860 a burglar entered his home and awakened the children, who called their father. Pidwell grappled with the armed man, who pulled the trigger of his pistol, but the gun misfired. A second time the gun misfired. Help reached Pidwell then and the burglar was arrested.

Pidwell created much excitement on the dusty streets when he moved about. He rode spirited horses and always at the gallop. In 1865 when dashing along Broad Street he was thrown and he appeared dead. He survived concussion and a broken collar bone.

Two years later he started for Esquimalt on a fast horse. At an intersection a team of horses, drawing a heavy wagon, threw up a cloud of dust as they wheeled. Pidwell was roaring on, one hand

REV. F. E. H. JAMES
. . . pastor of Metropolitan

clutching his hat, and unable to see for the dust. He collided violently with the wagon and his head struck a hub. He never regained consciousness.

There was sadness at Pidwell's passing because he had been a worthy citizen and had had a guiding hand in the development of Methodism in British Columbia.

Pidwell aided Dr. Evans, who headed the group of four missionaries, in getting a church started in Victoria and in determining the disposition of the missionaries.

Dr. Evans stayed in Victoria to found a church. Mr. White went to New Westminster; Mr. Browning to Nanaimo, and Mr. Robson to Hope and Yale.

The police barracks were used for the first service of the Methodists and attracted 20 people. Dr. Evans used as his text for this service Romans 1:16... "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

With Pidwell leading, the Methodists quickly determined to have a church. A visit to Governor Douglas resulted in the Hudson's Bay Company donating three lots at the corner of Pandora Avenue and Broad Street upon which a church would be built.

On August 15, 1859, Governor Douglas laid the corner stone and the following year the church was in use. The congregation faced financial difficulties, as the quarterly income was but $241.17 and the church was soon in debt $6,779.

Help was on the way in the form of several men who to take a prominent part in the development of British Columbia. In 1861 John Jessop completed a walk across Canada and joined the Pandora Street Church. He became the first principal of Central School and a figure in the educational life of the colony and later, the province. He died in 1901 and the chimes which ring from the tower of Metropolitan United Church were donated as a memorial to him.

Another figure was David Spencer, who arrived in 1863 and became a pillar of the church for half a century, as well as head of the largest department store in British Columbia.

At this time Dr. Evans was disturbed over conditions in the city and area. He regetted his people "had not been able to assist the poor savages."

By 1889 the church was too small and consideration was given to a new church. Three lots at the corner of Pandora, Quadra and Johnson Streets were purchased for $12,000 and architects instructed to prepare plans for a $60,000 structure. It must seat 1,500. This was a tremendous undertaking for the congregation but on May 17, 1891, the magnificent Metropolitan Church was opened. It was the finest church west of Toronto and still has few equals in the west.

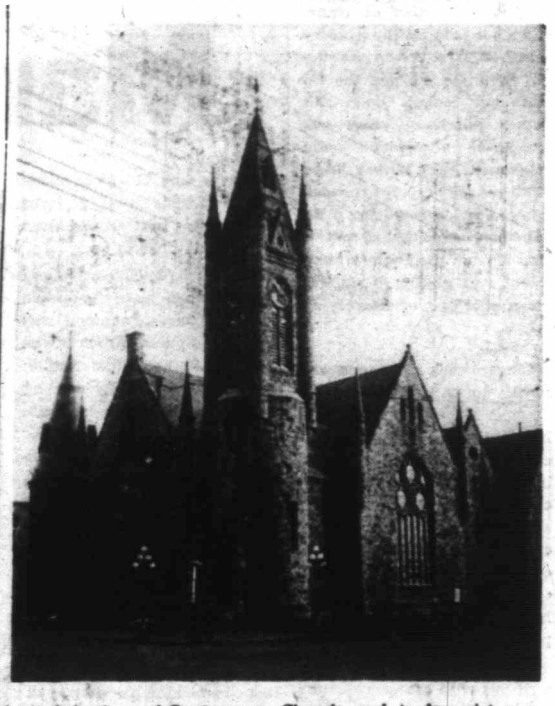
"Old Pandora Church," the affectionate term used by the congregation in referring to the first edifice, was torn down, and Brackman-Ker erected the present building and operated a grain and feed business there for many years.

Metropolitan entered upon a great missionary effort and soon was known as the Mother Church of Methodism. It has been responsible for starting Centennial United Church, Victoria West United Church, James Bay United Church, Fairfield United Church, Hampshire Road, later embodied with Oak Bay United Church, and missions to the Indians and Chinese.

Metropolitan can look back on a useful life in this city. From its membership have come mayors, aldermen, school trustees, premiers, members of the legislature leaders in industrial and educational circles.

Metropolitan membership called for strict adherence to a moral code, which frowned upon dancing, card playing, drinking, smoking or attendance at theatres. In 1899 the choir, which felt such restrictions should not be imposed on it, went on strike when the board passed a resolution forbidding members of the choir taking part in dances, balls or theatre performances. Oldtimers held firmly to this code but when in 1925 Methodism, Congregationalism and Presbyterianism joined forces and formed the United Church of Canada, there was a general falling away from these tenets.

Metropolitan was seized with the great enthusiasm which engulfed Western Canada as the real estate boom unloosed its power in 1910 and



invited the General Conference of the Methodist Church to convene in Metropolitan. This was a gigantic undertaking and could only be held in the large centres in the east. It meant transporting 300 delegates to this city and housing them for three weeks. But Metropolitan was equal to the occasion and for the first time the conference was held west of the Great Lakes.

At this conference the first breath of church union was drawn and within 15 years it had been accomplished. Also, the conference was visited by one of Canada's greatest sons, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who spoke to the delegates.

Metropolitan Church was proud when the conference opened to unveil its massive Cassavant four-manual organ, the biggest west of Toronto at that time and still one of the finest in Canada.

When church union was achieved the congregation of First Congregational Church joined Metropolitan and their church was later sold and is now First Baptist.

Metropolitan is still ambitious. Its large facilities are again too small for its work. Recently the property on Pandora Avenue, to the east of the church, was purchased and plans are now being made to provide new accommodation for the Sunday School and a small chapel.

As Metropolitan holds its special services in February its membership will have one eye on the golden past and the other on the challenges of the future. They will be constantly reminded of this by the new illuminations. The big Rose Window over the main entrance has been illuminated by Miss Hazel Sargent in memory of her parents, who were long-time members of the church. The main tower and the west window have been illuminated by Miss Amy Wills in memory of her parents, whose membership dated back to the Old Pandora Church, and to her sister, a life-long member.

Services will be highlighted by the appearance here of the Moderator of the United Church, the Rt. Rev. Angus J. MacQueen, DD, who will preach at both services on Sunday, Feb. 8, and at the congregational anniversary party on the following Monday. Premier W. A. C. Bennett and representatives of other deominations will bring special greetings to this gathering, which will assemble at 6.30 p.m. in Pendray Hall for dessert.

On the opening Sunday, Feb. 1, the pastors, Rev. F. E. H. James, DD, and Rev. Laura Butler, will speak in the morning and in the evening Mrs. T. Harry Johns, daughter of a former pastor, will speak on "The Coming of the Pioneers."

On Sunday, Feb. 15, a former pastor, Rev. Dr. A. E. Whitehouse, will speak in the morning and Dr. James will take the evening service. On Sunday, Feb. 22, Rev. William Taylor, PhD., principal of Union College, Vancouver, will be the morning preacher and Rev. Dr. Cyrus Albertson, of Seattle, will be the speaker.

At all these services the choir will present special music and on Wednesday, March 11, will present the oratorio, "The Creation," in Metropolitan.

It had been planned to have a dramatic presentation "Our Church," depicting the activities of Metropolitan Church over the past 100 years, but due to the unfortunate illness of the director, Mrs. Nicholson, this has been postponed until later in the year.

The Men's Club will be hosts to an old-fashioned tea meeting on Friday evening, Feb. 27.

Once the ceremonies are over Metropolitan will once again face the future with determination and willigness to continue playing its effective role in the life of Victoria.